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Review of the problem of human immunodeficiency virus/ acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in all its aspects

Letter dated 12 January 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the pleasure of enclosing the conclusions and recommendations of the seminar on the rights of the child in a world with HIV and AIDS, organized by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the European Union. The seminar was held at Harare from 23 to 25 October 2000.

The overall objectives of the seminar were to appreciate and assess the effects and impact of HIV and AIDS on the rights of the child in the SADC region, taking into account the special needs and circumstances of the girl child, to consider measures to support children affected by HIV and AIDS and to arrive at a common understanding on these issues.

The specific objectives were to discuss the effects and impact of HIV and AIDS on education systems and the full and equal access to education of children affected by HIV and AIDS, the right to and importance of education and information concerning sexual rights and health as a means of HIV and AIDS prevention and how to involve youth in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

The participants were delegates from member States of SADC and the European Union, representatives of the European Commission and the SADC Executive Secretariat, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the United Nations Children's Fund and other United Nations agencies, and non-governmental organizations. The meeting, co-chaired by Ulitala Hiveluah, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Women's Affairs and Child Welfare of Namibia, and Ambassador Didier Ferrand of France, was held in a constructive atmosphere, and the presentations were supplemented by appreciated and valuable discussions among participants.

The fourth ministerial conference between the European Union and SADC, held on 29 and 30 November 2000 in Gaborone, welcomed the conclusions and recommendations of the seminar and asked the European Union and SADC presidencies to propose ways of furthering collaboration between the two regions in the continuing preparatory work leading up to the special session of the General Assembly in 2001 for follow-up to the 1990 World Summit for Children.

For this reason I should be grateful if you would circulate the text of the present letter and the attached conclusions and recommendations as a document of the General Assembly under agenda items 42 and 179.

(*Signed*) Pierre **Schori**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations

Annex to the letter dated 12 January 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Conclusions and recommendations of the seminar on the rights of the child in a world with HIV and AIDS held by the Southern African Development Community and the European Union in Harare from 23 to 25 October 2000

Introduction

The seminar on the rights of the child in relation to HIV/AIDS and education, organized by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the European Union, was held in Harare from 23 to 25 October 2000. The seminar was attended by senior experts from the SADC region and the European Union as well as from United Nations organizations and non-governmental organizations. The honourable Deputy Minister for Health and Child Welfare of Zimbabwe, Dr. David Parirenyatwa, opened the meeting. In his opening remarks he addressed the situation of children in a world with HIV and AIDS.

The meeting was jointly chaired by Ulitala Hiveluah, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Women's Affairs and Child Welfare of Namibia, and Didier Ferrand, Ambassador, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France.

The overall objectives of the seminar were to discuss:

- The effects and impact of HIV/AIDS on educational systems and the full and equal access to education of children infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS;
- The right to and importance of education and information concerning sexual rights and health as a means of HIV prevention and how to involve youth in the fight against HIV and AIDS;
- Measures to support children affected by and infected with HIV/AIDS in relation to the above two objectives.

Context and need for political commitment

HIV and AIDS pose complex development issues, some that may be common to all societies and others that vary among societies. Children and young people should, however, always be placed at the centre of our concerns.

As the epidemic unfolds, it places new burdens on countries, peoples and their development partners. The consequences are felt today and will be increasingly present for years to come. Yet the ultimate human, societal and economic toll of this epidemic depends on actions taken or not taken over the next years. Political will and sound decisions are crucial to advancing efforts against HIV and AIDS. We must at all costs avoid making children and young people pay the price for lack of such political will and sound economic decision-making.

On the basis of new evidence, there is now consensus that the impact of HIV and AIDS on children and young people is much greater than was previously recognized. To date, the response in terms of providing prevention, care and support to children and young people falls far short of needs.

Transmission of HIV is preventable with tools available today. HIV and AIDS can no longer be seen as a health issue alone, but must be recognized as a critical development problem. It also undermines the rights of the child.

Children and young people are especially vulnerable to HIV transmission when they first become sexually active. They may lack appropriate sex education and/or life skills training, as well as social support. Infants whose mothers are living with HIV or AIDS are also at risk of contracting HIV from their mothers (during pregnancy, during birth or through breastfeeding).

Gender stereotyping is part of a child's socialization process. Expectations of what is feminine and masculine are deeply ingrained from early childhood into adolescence and beyond. As a result of existing gender norms in many countries, girls and young women are poorly informed about how to protect themselves against HIV. Young men, on the other hand, are expected to show "masculinity", which contributes to high-risk behaviour. Addressing gender equality must be an integral part of overall HIV prevention strategies, care and support.

The situation of children in a world with HIV and AIDS is getting worse. More children are orphaned as the number of deaths among adults increases. This forces them to undertake new roles within the household and seek new ways of surviving. As a result, many children are forced to leave school or their attendance is irregular. As more mothers transmit HIV to their infants, the number of children living with HIV or AIDS also increases.

Investment in education is crucial for long-term socio-economic development and for HIV prevention. A weakening of the educational system as a consequence of AIDS will make it more difficult for children and young people to receive information and education about HIV and AIDS before they become sexually active. Moreover, the quantity and quality of education decline as teachers at all levels die. Above all, this will have devastating consequences for the socio-economic development of entire nations, as generations of children will not have access to schooling unless appropriate action is taken urgently.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The meeting recalled the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The fulfilment of commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Child was in particular emphasized, as was universal access to primary education.

2. The meeting also recalled the overall objective for the year 2005, which was agreed to at the follow-up to the International Conference on Population and Development: to reduce HIV infection among persons 15 to 24 years of age by 25 per cent in the hardest-hit countries.

3. The meeting noted the need to enhance the capacity, commitment and efforts of all partners, including Governments, donors and the private sector, to address in a coordinated way the challenges of HIV and AIDS and to build on local experience and locally identified needs and demands. The need for a political commitment to break the culture of silence and stigma was stressed.

4. The meeting recognized the need for a partnership in financing the challenges ahead and for increased international assistance to support national Governments in their own efforts. Keeping in mind that AIDS is a global issue, the meeting encouraged the further exploration of new and innovative ways of funding.

5. While recognizing the important role of the health sector, the meeting also underlined the importance of an approach to effectively addressing HIV and AIDS that involves all sectors. The meeting also recognized HIV and AIDS as a regional emergency.

6. The meeting emphasized the fundamental role played by education for the long-term socio-economic development of countries and the need to attach high priority to the right to free education for children and young people. The school is a particularly important institution in the lives of children and communities, and it needs to be supported in the response to HIV and AIDS.

7. The meeting recognized the importance of the ongoing cooperation between the SADC and European Union member countries and emphasized the need for a strengthened partnership between the Governments of the SADC and European Union countries to address the challenges of HIV and AIDS in relation to children and young people. Also, the meeting confirmed the need for partnerships among Governments, bilateral donors, co-sponsors of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and other multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector.

8. The meeting reiterated the need for participatory approaches. Children and young people want to take an active part in designing prevention and care and support activities. To help them to realize their rights, Governments are urged to make sure that children and young people are fully involved.

9. The meeting identified, among other things, the following strategic goals:

(a) To encourage greater political commitment to HIV prevention programmes, including those within national AIDS plans, that will ensure that:

- The rights of children and young people are fully reflected in national legal systems, including educational law and regulations;
- Policy and decision makers at all levels guarantee that children and young people receive accurate, relevant and sound information about sexual matters, including HIV and AIDS, preferably before sexual debut;
- Governments integrate activities within their national AIDS plans in order to provide children and young people with the right knowledge and skills to minimize the risk for HIV infection and to cope with the effects of HIV and AIDS in their lives;
- Governments further develop and find methods and resources to provide all children with free and high-quality education which, in the long term, will be advantageous for the individual child as well as for the community as a whole as envisioned by the international development target of achieving universal primary education by 2015;
- Cultural issues and traditional practices are considered, taking into account the positive and negative aspects;

- Programmes maximize community participation, including children and young people;

(b) To implement actions that protect children and young people against HIV infection, including:

- Promoting strengthened education and dissemination of frank information on sexual matters, including HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, through, i.e., schools, out-of-school programmes and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights services;

- Promoting gender equality and empowerment of girls and young women so that they can safeguard themselves from unsafe sex with their partners, and providing opportunities for boys and young men to appreciate the positive aspects of an equal relationship with girls and young women;

(c) To enable children and young people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS to pursue their lives with quality and dignity through, among other things:

- Provision of social and educational support to all affected children and young people, especially girls;

- Provision of social and economic support to impoverished households and communities as a means of strengthening their capacity to develop coping mechanisms;

- Provision of support to the health sector in order to improve access to comprehensive services for all children and young people affected by the epidemic, including reducing transmission from mother to child;

- Provision of support to the education sector so as to strengthen the role of the school in the community, develop strategies to keep all vulnerable children at school and provide education for those who are out of school.

10. The meeting agreed to forward these conclusions and recommendations to the ministerial meeting of SADC and European Union countries in Gaborone in November 2000, and it also recommended that the chairmanship of SADC and the European Union Presidency find ways to further the collaboration between the two regions in the continued preparatory work leading up to the special session of the General Assembly for follow-up to the World Summit for Children. The meeting also agreed to forward the full report of the meeting to the ministerial meeting.